Ecocriticism and a Non-Anthropocentric Humanism. Reflections on Local Natures and Global Responsibilities.

Ecocriticism and a Non-Anthropocentric Humanism

Reflections on Local Natures and Global Responsibilities*

SERENELLA IOVINO

> Man is altogether too much insisted on. The poet says the proper study of mankind is man. I say study to forget all that – take wider views of the universe. That is the egotism of the race.[1]

Introduction

IN *BEING AND TIME*, Martin Heidegger spoke of *Umsicht* as the aptitude humans have to look around themselves, and to define themselves in relation to the specific environment (*Umwelt*) that surrounds them. Today more than ever, this 'circumspection', this 'around sight', is charged with a sense of responsibility for the world which it is turned to. It is the responsibility for an environment whose health depends mostly on us, on our ability to organize in time and space a 'being-in-the-world' which is shaped through processes of production and consumption, of transformation and reduction of natural resources to their metabolic waste.

In a world in which everything that once seemed to be endless appears instead to be near to its end, our imagination faces a challenge: namely, that of radically redesigning our future scenarios in more inclusive terms – ethically

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[1] Henry D. Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey & Francis H. Allen (Mineola NY: Dover, 1962): 369.

as well as culturally. This requires of the humanities a twofold commitment: on the one hand, renewed critical attention to the physical dynamics of the world in which human beings 'live and have their being'. As the Americanist Glen Love has said, "Teaching and studying literature without reference to the natural conditions of the world and the basic ecological principles that underlie all life seems increasingly shortsighted, incongruous."[2] On the other hand, it must not be forgotten that society is an essential element of these dynamics. This means that the humanities can help us work out desirable scenarios only if, relating themselves to the world 'out there', they are supported by the project of an 'ethical evolution' of cultural discourse.

In such a framework, an interdisciplinary approach to literary criticism is necessary, and allows us to 'use' literature as a means of culture and of social and historical awareness. In my view, an approach based on the interaction of literature and philosophy can be particularly fruitful. In fact, a "cross-fertilization"[3] between the critical stances of philosophy and the imaginative and communicative power of literature makes both ethics and literature much more effective when we are facing the challenges of contemporary society. This is something that 'ethical' interpretations of literature, also inspired by the work of philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Hans Jonas, have maintained for several years.[4] Narrative imagination, in fact, can, to quote Martha Nussbaum, be an important instrument of social consciousness for the 'world citizen'.[5] But in the present scenario of environmental disruption and social crisis such an approach to literature is also the theoretical premise of ecocriticism, a critical discipline whose major stance is basically an ethical one and which is driven by the idea of literature and culture as 'ecological'.[6]

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[2] Glen A. Love, *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment* (Charlottesville VA: UP of Virginia, 2003): 16.

[3] Cheryll Glotfelty, "Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty & Harold Fromm (Athens & London: U of Georgia P, 1996): xvii–xix.

[4] See Lawrence Buell, "Introduction: In Pursuit of Ethics," *PMLA* 114.1 ("Ethics and Literary Study"; 1999): 7–19.

[5] See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard UP, 1997).

[6] The literature on ecocriticism (or environmental literary criticism) is extremely rich, and in constant growth. For an introductory approach, see *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ed. Glotfelty & Fromm; Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2005); Scott Slovic, "Literature," in *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Dale Jamieson (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2001): 251–63; Hubert Zapf, *Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie: Zur kulturellen Funktion imaginativer Texte am Beispiel des amerikanischen Romans* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2002);

In the age of ecological crisis, literature can choose to be 'ethically charged', and to communicate an idea of responsibility. In the age of ecological crisis, this responsibility is global. And what is endangered is not only 'nature' in general but local natures in particular. This is the starting-point of my considerations.

Local natures, global responsibilities: A culture of co-presence

Very often, thinking about local natures means thinking about landscapes. When we look around us, we see changes so continuous and radical that these landscapes seem to be constantly under siege. 'Landscape' is not meant here as mere scenery, but as a balance of nature and culture stratified through centuries of mutual adaptation. It is a 'warehouse' of common memories to humanity and nature, in which human and natural life are dialectically interlaced in the form of a *co-presence*.[7] But these landscapes around us, far from recalling a pristine (and idealized) pictorial beauty, look in turn more often like places of destruction and abandonment: for a civilization in which development – at whatever price – is most of the time improperly called 'progress', the beauty of landscape (whether wilderness or art) is optional.[8] In saying that, I refer in particular to the Report on the 'ecomafia', published every year by Legambiente, the leading NGO in Italy for environmental conservation. Traffic in toxic waste, in protected animal and plant species, illegal gambling on exploited animals, systematic devastation of 'local' territory for abusive building developments that cause severe ecological damage – all this gives form to an extremely dense web through which 'local' criminal activities become 'global'. (From the Report we know, for instance, that the most powerful partner of the Italian ecomafia is the Chinese mafia.) The business of this ecomafia in Italy entails a gigantic amount of money: about 23 billion Euros.[9]

Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004); Ursula K. Heise, "The Hitchhicker's Guide to Ecocriticism," *PMLA* 121.2 (2006): 503–16; and Serenella Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria: Una strategia di sopravvivenza* (Milan: Ed. Ambiente, 2006).

[7] On this topic, see Paul Shepard, *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967); Eugenio Turri, *Antropologia del paesaggio* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1974); Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Fontana, 1996); Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Language of Landscape* (New Haven CT & London: Yale UP, 1998); *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002).

[8] Critical reflections on the distinction between progress and development, as well as on the effects of development on traditional landscapes, have been very insightfully expressed by the Italian poet, essayist, and film-maker Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–75). See, in particular, Pasolini, *Scritti Corsari* (Milan: Garzanti, 1975).

[9] See *Ecomafia 2007*, ed. Legambiente (Milan: Ed. Ambiente, 2007).

The result of all this is a situation of great ecological gravity for both nature and society. But the gravity is cultural, too. If the ecomafia can rise in Italy as well as elsewhere in the world, it is because a broader civic ethic is missing. It is the lack of such an inclusive cultural framework – a culture of co-presence – that erases the split between the disease of nature and the disease of society.

Humanism presupposes both a civic ethic and an emancipatory framework, and in so doing it can be seen as the condition for an inclusive ethic of culture. What I call a 'culture of co-presence': namely, one that would put humans and nature together in the same emancipatory discourse, is what I mean here by an extended, non-anthropocentric, humanism. Claims for cultural inclusiveness are not new, especially in postmodern times. In fact, for a line of thought that – like postmodernism – does not consist in a school or a philosophical doctrine but is, rather, characterized by the crucial role of political dispute and criticism, an ethic of culture and a culture of inclusivity are *per se* instruments of social hope and democratic opening.[10] Humanism is a discourse that tries to build up this sense of hope by working out common cultural ground – one in which different players may act according to principles of self-determination and mutual responsibility. On this common ground, culture operates as a regulative and constructive ideal that enables us to shape our future freely and consciously. In the present scenario, such common ground, which includes our 'local natures', cannot be conceived solely in human terms.

In the last preface to his famous study *Orientalism*, Edward Said wrote that humanism is "the final resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history."[11] Finding an instrument of resistance to 'inhuman practices and injustices' therefore means also reflecting on the way human history is entrenched in a broader system of interconnections that include the non-human world. Ecology can offer a paradigm (both environmental and social) of this ethical 'culture of co-presence' into which traditional humanism ought to evolve.[12] Embedding humanism in an ecological

[10] On social hope, see Cornel West, *Restoring Hope* (Boston MA: Beacon, 1997); Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999); and Maurizio Valsania, *Umanesimo postindustriale: Breve apologia della speranza sociale* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2005).

[11] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978; New York: Vintage, 2003): xxix.

[12] See David Ehrenfeld, *The Arrogance of Humanism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1981) and Luc Férry, *The New Ecological Order*, tr. Carol Volk (*Le nouvel ordre écologique: L'arbre, l'animal et l'homme*, 1992; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995). See also Louise Westling's research on 'ecological humanism': "Green Humanism: A New Vision for a New Century," *Tamkang Review* 32 (2002): 71–93, and her contribution to the "Forum on Literature of the

paradigm means, in fact, giving humans not simply the feeling of their intellectual independence from dogmas and authorities but, most of all, the awareness of their ecological interdependence in a context subsistent on the difference of its elements.[13] We will see how literature and literary criticism can be an active part in the project of a new humanism.

From centre to periphery, from singular to plural: Environmental ethics and the conceptual premises of ecocriticism

The category of difference is paramount in the discourse of environmental culture, a discourse whose broad theoretical roots in many respects come close to the 'constructive' anti-ideological stance of postmodernism. I am aware that postmodernism and ecological thought have been (and still are) considered by environmental philosophers and literary critics to be at odds with each other.[14] If taken to extremes, in fact, the inner relativism of deconstructive postmodernism may lead to a nihilistic attitude towards nature seen as a cultural product or as a linguistic construct – this, up to the point of denying nature's 'objective' reality. The paradox of this vision has been pointed out by Kate Soper: "it is not language which has a hole in its ozone layer; and the real thing continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier."[15]

Nevertheless, owing to the multiplicity of its issues and positions, it would not be accurate to describe postmodernism as sheer deconstructionism. Some interpreters, in fact, trace a distinction between a 'deconstructive postmodernism' and an 'ecological' or 'reconstructive postmodernism' – one that "sees the passage beyond the breakdown of the mechanistic assumption of modernity as potentially leading to an ecological understanding of the world rather

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Environment," *PMLA* 114.5 (1999): 1103–1104. Not to forget Vernon Gras, "Why the Humanities Need a New Paradigm Which Ecology Can Provide," *Anglistik: Mitteilungen des deutschen Anglistenverbandes* 2 (2003): 45–61.

[13] See Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: History of Ecological Ideas* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994): 316–38.

[14] See Neil Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992); Michael E. Zimmerman, *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernism* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994); Arran Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995); *Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction*, ed. Michael Soulé & Gary Lease (Washington DC: Island Press, 1995); Terry Gifford, "The Social Construction of Nature," *ISLE* 3.2 (1996): 27–35.

[15] Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995): 151.

than a nihilistic disintegration of all values."[16] Such a 'reconstructive postmodernism', based on principles of inclusion and on a dialectical interaction between different subjects and cultures, entails the idea that creativity and sense of community can lead to the removal of those ideologies that have determined the ecological crisis.[17] The decisive feature that ecological culture and constructive postmodernism have in common is thus their being a criticism of ideological and oppressive mind-sets.

Postmodernism, in fact, rejects the idea of supposedly universal representations of reality, all-pervasive mythologies, seen as means by which dominant powers reinforce their structures and impose their model of civilization. Likewise, ecological culture rejects the 'meta-narratives' of this model of civilization, and sees it, in turn, as a form of ideological centralism. Against this intellectual 'mastery' (which may involve Western 'traditional' culture and philosophy), ecological culture sheds light on new (and more 'peripheral') subjects of value, proposing more inclusive conceptual models. This means "breaking up closed world views and exclusionary truth-claims in favor of plural perspectives, multiple meanings, and dynamic interrelationships."[18] Here, theoretical and political issues are set in the same framework. This is particularly evident if we consider some of the main issues of the environmental-ethical debate, whose principles are crucial to the rise of ecocriticism.

Ever since its first, seminal steps in the USA with Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, and finally its flourishing in the early 1970s, environmental culture has been based on an ethic that aimed at overthrowing the traditional order, a 'subversive' ethic. Here the binary global/local is translated, we might say, into the binary centre/periphery. Compared to a philosophical framework in which the theoretical focus is put on an ideal fulcrum (*man* as a rational being, or God's intelligence), this ethic is characterized by the absence of a founding centre. From the centre, it moves toward the periphery. Moving from centre to periphery here means extending the concept of moral subjectivity: i.e. integrating into the discourse of value different subjects from those contemplated by the Western philosophical tradition. These subjects no longer include only actors that are rational, free, and

[16] Charlene Spretnak, *States of Grace: The Recovering of Meaning in the Postmodern Age* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991): 19; and 10–32. See also Linda Hutcheon, "Eruptions of the Postmodern: The Postcolonial and the Ecological," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 51–52 (Winter 1993–Spring 1994): 146–63.

[17] I have articulated my position on this issue in my book *Ecologia letteraria*, 20–21; 29–38.

[18] Hubert Zapf, "Literature and Ecology: Introductory Remarks on a New Paradigm of Literary Studies," *Anglia: Zeitschrift für Englische Philologie* 124.1 (2006): 4.

self-aware (i.e. humans), but also those beings that might be called 'passive moral subjects': namely, non-human animals, plants, landscape; or, collectively, the biosphere. An environmental ethic displaces its focus from the 'monological' centralism of the Cartesian self (the one who says: 'I think, therefore I am') to everything that in nature undeniably *is*: that is, to everything that may not have language, or reason (at least in a human sense), but nonetheless has an autonomy of life. We could say that such an ethic is no longer an 'ego-logical' ethic founded on the primacy of the human ego, but an 'eco-logical' ethic – one open to the multiplicity of natural life and drawing on the breadth of a context, of a 'home-place' (*oikos*).[19] More generally, ecology provides ethics with paradigms, which, whether holistic or individualistic, set up a critical debate with traditional anthropocentrism, at the same time bridging the gap between what is generally considered morally valuable (humans, society) and what is asserted to be morally neutral or indifferent (non-human beings, nature).[20] This means widening the scope of the *objects* of moral responsibility from a singular 'centre' (humankind) to a multiplicity of 'peripheral', ethically as well as ontologically marginalized subjects.[21]

At the same time, ecology, taken as a model of dynamic interrelatedness, becomes a useful interpretative framework for the dialectic of social structures and political phenomena. Extending moral subjectivity is not only an inversion from the centralism of a singular self to the 'provinces' of plural moral subjects, but also an invitation to consider society itself in ecological terms. As some postmodern thinkers have shown, the Cartesian self does not disclose a neutral and 'natural' subjectivity, but is deeply embedded in dominant roles: such a self is male, white, and free. This point is one of the theoretical tenets of radical currents such as social ecology and ecofeminism which, sometimes polemicizing against anti-humanistic generalizations like those – for instance – of deep ecology, insist on a critique of discriminatory

[19] See *Literatur und Ökologie*, ed. Axel Goodbody (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 1998); and Zapf, *Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie*. Glen Love has written: "The challenge that faces us is to outgrow our notion that human beings are so special that the earth exists for our comfort and disposal alone, to move beyond a narrow ego-consciousness toward a more inclusive eco-consciousness" (*Practical Ecocriticism*, 25).

[20] Among the holistic approachs to environmental ethics, the main paradigms are Aldo Leopold's land ethic and the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess's deep ecology. Examples of invidualistic approach are biocentric theories (Albert Schweitzer, Paul Taylor), the animal-liberation movement (Peter Singer), and the animal-rights movement (Tom Regan).

[21] I specify here 'objects', although it is obvious that the only *actors* of moral responsibility are humans. The crucial contribution on this topic is still Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: The Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985).

attitudes and repressive sets which are at work in the way Western societies conceive of the relationship between humans and nature.[22] According to both these currents, the anthropocentric model of the exploitation of nature reflects an attitude which is classist and anti-emancipatory (for social ecology) or sexist and patriarchal (for ecofeminism).

Both social ecology and ecofeminism presuppose an ecology of cultural forms. Murray Bookchin, the founder of social ecology, maintains that society is – like nature – pervaded by an evolutionary dynamic that encompasses cultural images and orients the life of the individuals, setting up a circle of mutual conditioning with the environment.[23] Likewise, ecofeminism is not a mere combination of ecological and gender issues but denounces an ideological framework of "twin dominations"[24] in which the master-subject (whether humankind, man, or colonizer) tends to annihilate and to 'devour' every form of otherness (respectively, non-humans, women, or the colonized).[25] Social ecologists and ecofeminists see ecological crisis as rooted in the tendency, which has progressively grown in industrialized societies, to conceive of nature as an element to be conquered and tsubjugated, in line with a dualistic hierarchy that opposes nature to a dominating and conquering humankind. On the historical and social level, this hierarchy has also implied the subjection of humans to other humans. Such an interpretation aims, therefore, at demystify-

[22] Social ecology and ecofeminism generally insist "that it is ultimately human needs and societal well-being which must determine our approach to nature, whereas deep ecology emphasizes on the contrary that nature has value in and of itself, independently of its functions for human society"; Ursula K. Heise, "Science and Ecocriticism," *The American Book Review* 18.5 (July–August 1997): 4. On social ecology, see Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Palo Alto CA: Cheshire, 1982); on ecofeminism, see Françoise d'Eaubonne, *Le féminisme ou la mort* (Paris: Pierre Horay, 1974), Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), and Karen Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000). On the social ecology–deep ecology debate, see Murray Bookchin, "Social Ecology Versus Deep Ecology," *Socialist Review* 88.3 (1988): 11–29, and *Defending the Earth: A Dialogue Between Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman*, ed. Steve Chase (Boston MA: South End, 1991). On the ecofeminism–deep ecology debate, see Ariel Salleh, "Deeper than Deep Ecology," *Environmental Ethics* 6.4 (1984): 339–45, Warwick Fox, "The Deep Ecology-Ecofeminist Debate and Its Parallels," *Environmental Ethics* 11 (1989): 5–25, and Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002): 196–217.

[23] See Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*.

[24] Karen Warren, "Ecofeminism: Introduction," in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, ed. Michael E. Zimmerman et al. (Upper Saddle River NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998): 266.

[25] Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 192–95.

ing, on every level and in the light of ecological interdependence, the conceptual architectures of domination, by the same token showing the mistakes of historical and economic phenomena such as colonialism, industrialism, liberalism, and consumerism.

Ecofeminism in particular insists that – in a system of parallel hierarchies – the dominating subjects seek "to create a slave-world, a 'terra-formed' landscape which offers no resistance, which does not answer back because it no longer has a voice and a language of its own."[26] This movement is therefore aimed at a vindication of the rights of difference by and large: a difference not only of gender, but also of culture, of ethnic group, of social and economic status, even a difference of species.[27] In doing this, the category of difference is a crucial conceptual premise, being a source of inspiration for forms of ecological activism based on solidarity among life-forms as well as among social subjects. As the Australian philosopher Val Plumwood has pointed out, "the basic concept required for an appropriate ethic of environmental activism is not that of identity or unity […] but that of solidarity." Solidarity, in fact, "requires not just the affirmation of difference, but also sensitivity to the difference between positioning oneself *with* the other and positioning oneself *as* the other."[28]

Social ecology and ecofeminism take from the principles of environmental ethics the need to broaden the scope of moral subjectivity. But, in a complementary way, the broadening they propose is primarily connected with society and history: along with the idea of an ecological interrelatedness between cultural forms and human behaviours within society, they make social justice an environmental issue. It is by virtue of this 'ecology of society' (a parallel or 'squared' ecology) that environmental culture replaces intolerant and discriminatory ideological constructs about history and civilization with a wider and more inclusive conceptual frame – one in which the idea of history itself is no longer restricted to the perpective of Western centrality, but can be seen as a plurality. History can thus be reset in a post-ideological outlook, taking into account what Lyotard called *petites histoires* and which, following in the footsteps of the ecofeminist thinker Jim Cheney, we may call 'local' or 'bio-

[26] Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 193.

[27] "Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature"; Greta C. Gaard, "Introduction," in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, ed. Greta C. Gaard (Philadelphia PA: Temple UP, 1993): 1.

[28] Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 202 (my emphasis). The entire chapter (196–217) is relevant here.

regional' narratives. It is, in fact, through these often marginalized or ignored narratives that discourse, from being 'totalizing' and 'colonizing', becomes 'contextual'. It can therefore be functional to a history no longer based upon a line of supposedly universal concepts, which are in turn instruments of cultural colonization:

> To prepare a theory, a religion, or culture for export is to turn it into a potential tool for the colonization of the minds of other people. The effect of totalizing language is to assimilate the world to it. […] Contextual discourse reverses this; it assimilates language to the situation […].[29]

Environmental ethics and the radical critical perspectives of ecofeminism and social ecology do not come down to abstract linguistic exercises, but consider language itself as a part of landscape. This means that they make it possible to see human history itself as a contextual history, and our values as connected to the concrete, empirical interdependence between human beings and their environment.[30] In the context of such an interdependence, our "*mind*scapes," as shared horizons of meaning, "are as multiple as the *land*scapes which ground them."[31] Ecology, "the logic of home," is "finally narrative."[32]

The major concern of an *inclusive* environmental culture is therefore to do justice to 'peripheral' narratives, and to consider them as the coordinates of a "*moral* space which is at the same time the space we live in physically."[33] This implies the idea that the task of an environmental culture, as an 'evolved culture', is to reveal new values, and that the only form of non-colonizing humanism is that of an open, ecological humanism – a 'posthuman' one, in that it refers these new values to a sphere of existence which does not belong solely to humans. It is in its openness, interrelatedness, and inclusivity that the normativity of such humanism resides. Applied to society, this humanism becomes the opportunity to develop a dynamic identity – one negotiated through difference and multiplicity, and not one imposed by a sequence of hierarchical levels. In this discourse, to admit that there are "other viable narratives" is to

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[29] Jim Cheney, "Post-Modern Environmental Ethics as Bioregional Narrative," *Environmental Ethics* 11 (1989): 120.

[30] See *What's Nature's Worth: Narrative Expressions of Environmental Values*, ed. Terre Satterfield & Scott Slovic (Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 2004).

[31] Cheney, "Post-Modern Environmental Ethics as Bioregional Narrative," 126.

[32] Holmes Rolston, III, "The Human Standing in Nature: Storied Fitness in the Moral Observer," quoted in Cheney, "Post-Modern Environmental Ethics as Bioregional Narrative," 125.

[33] Cheney, "Post-Modern Environmental Ethics as Bioregional Narrative," 129.

"define oneself honestly and transparently in relation to other viable beings." It is to admit that "one's culture has made choices that were contingent, and that these were choices among actual alternatives about valuable ways of organizing a life, not simply reflections of the one universal constitution."[34] Against the 'master-narratives', overloaded with ideological violence, an inclusive humanism is *per se* an ethic of culture. It is an instrument of pacification, in that it rejects the category of necessity in favour of the idea of intersubjective constructivism.

Ecocriticism: Narratives as moral instructions

There is a clear link between such stances and the rise of ecocriticism. Consistent with the need, expressed by environmental ethics, to extend moral considerability to the non-human, ecocriticism also presupposes an ecology of society, in line with the analyses of social ecology and ecofeminism. But the major premise of ecocriticism is the idea of an ecology of culture. This means that it sees the possibility of building a circuit of positive interaction between the life of nature and the products of culture.[35] At the same time, as an interpretative discipline, ecocriticism is not stuck with a single genre or a 'central' cultural tradition but is open to a multiplicity of voices and of narratives, both seen as pathways through 'viable' cultural 'alternatives'. In this perspective, "by breaking up closed circuits of dogmatic world views and exclusionary truth claims in favour of plural perspectives, multiple meanings and dynamic interrelationships," literature and cultural products can become "the site of a

[34] All quotations from Deane W. Curtin, *Chinnagounder's Challenge: The Question of Ecological Citizenship* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1999): 175. See also Curtin's *Environmental Ethics for a Postcolonial World* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

[35] See Joseph Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and a Play Ethic* (Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1997); Hubert Zapf, *Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie*; and Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria*. Hubert Zapf, in particular, has developed the idea of 'literature as cultural ecology'. His thesis is that "imaginative literature, in comparison with other textual genres and types of discourse, can be described in its functional profile in such a way that it *acts like an ecological principle or an ecological energy within the larger system of cultural discourses*"; Zapf, "The State of Ecocriticism and the Function of Literature as Cultural Ecology," in *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism*, ed. Catrin Gersdorf & Sylvia Mayer (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2006): 55. Although I fully subscribe to Zapf's interpretation and acknowledge the role of literature as central to this discourse, my perspective is oriented to including other artistic and representative expressions among the forms of 'cultural ecology' (and thus among the objects of ecocriticim). On this point, see Scott Slovic, contribution to the "Forum on Literature of the Environment," *PMLA* 114.5 (1999): 1102.

constant, *creative renewal* of language, perception, communication, and imagination."[36] This makes ecocriticism both an interpretative methodology and a form of social pedagogy.[37]

As a result, whereas environmental ethics develops and clarifies a theoretical discourse, ecocriticism looks for cultural instruments: literature in particular, but also other cultural forms such as drama, cinema, and visual art, even music,[38] represent 'tools' suitable for this purpose. This creates a circle of implicit or explicit cooperation between writers (and artists in general) and their ecocritical interpreters. In that they all work in order to build an 'ethical awareness' about the culture–nature relationship, they can be considered as "lay ethicists."[39] All narrative forms, in fact, can transmit "subtle statements of authors'/tellers' values and can probe and elicit value-related thoughts from readers/listeners."[40] In such a framework, literature (and art in general) can be seen not merely as a representation of ideas and fictional contents but also as a representation of values. By the same token, ecocritical interpretation elicits the text's ethical message and creates more visible cultural connections between text, authors, and the world that they talk to.

Interviewed by Scott Slovic, the American writer William Kittredge has recently said that "narrative helps readers internalize values, make them their own, emotionally, as necessary to life rather than simply interesting or distracting, as platforms from which to act."[41] Interacting with society, a narrative can reflect the crucial issues of the time in which it is produced, and help create new 'mythologies'. It can become, to quote Kittredge once again, "a set

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[36] Zapf, "The State of Ecocriticism," 56.

[37] David W. Orr, *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1992); Scott Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing: Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Barry Lopez* (Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 1992).

[38] On this topic (mostly connected with the concept of *soundscape*), see Denise Von Glahn, *Sounds of Place: Music and the American Cultural Landscape* (Boston MA: Northeastern UP, 2003). See also David Ingram's research on "Sound Ecologies: Ecocriticism and American Popular Music since 1960" (unpublished).

[39] Satterfield & Slovic, *What's Nature Worth?*, 2. In an ecocritical perspective, narrative can be thought of "not only [as] the telling of stories of particular events, but [as] the use of various forms of non-discursive language or the hybrid use of discursive analysis and more emotive and experiential modes of expressions, including sensory imagery, characters, and scenes. Information can be carried and framed just as fully through narrative as it can be in more formal didactic forms of language" (12).

[40] Satterfield & Slovic, *What's Nature Worth?*, 12.

[41] "Inciting Story: Narrative as the Mirror of Audience Values – Questionnaire Responses from William Kittredge," in Satterfield & Slovic, *What's Nature Worth?*, 25.

of implicit instructions from a society to its members, telling them what is valuable and how to conduct themselves if they are to preserve the things they value."[42] So considered, a narrative has not only a "retrospective gaze"[43] but, rather, a prospective, ethically preventive, and orientative look. It not only shows and teaches as the ancient *mythos* did, but, evoking *ethical* awareness about the values it shows, it *orients* our cultural evolution. Through narratives, the reader can, in fact, be driven toward the preservation of these values in a world of interconnections: namely, toward a self-preservation that passes through a material and cultural relationship to forms of otherness – a self-preservation depending on physical as well as cultural biodiversity.

Ecocriticism is the awareness about and implementation of this 'evolutionary' and 'preservative' function of narrative. My position here is in line with the Brazilian scholar Camilo Gomides' definition of ecocriticism as "the field of enquiry that analyzes and promotes works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations."[44] In its interpretative as well as pedagogical intent, ecocriticism expresses and implements a constructive ethic of the future.

Literature as applied ethics

An ethically oriented analysis of literary works, ecocriticism reveals the mutual mirroring of nature and its representations, maintaining that interpretation, as a sort of cultural archeology of the present time, can decipher the 'world' in which this mirroring occurs, drawing from it philosophical stances about values. As for environmental ethics, this presupposes a way of thinking in tune with the affirmative standpoints of 'ecological' postmodernism. In that it discriminates nature from its 'social constructions': namely, from its cultural representations (which can never be considered "innocent"[45]), and analyzes them, ecocriticism progressively distances itself from the relativistic outcomes of deconstructive postmodernism. By the same token, ecocriticism fully shares the anti-ideological attitude of 'reconstructive' postmodernism, becom-

[42] See William Kittredge, *Owning It All* (Minneapolis: Greywolf Press, 1987): 62.

[43] See Adriana Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti: Filosofia della narrazione* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2001): 24. Cavarero refers to Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958).

[44] Camilo Gomides, "Putting a New Definition of Ecocriticism to the Test: The Case of *The Burning Season*, a Film (Mal)Adaptation," *ISLE* 13.1 (Winter 2006): 16.

[45] Gifford, "The Social Construction of Nature," 27–35.

ing itself an ethico-critical exercise. It is this anti-ideological and educational purpose, in my view, that determines ecocriticism as a 'cross-fertilization' between philosophical stances and literary studies.

The idea of a relation between literature and philosophy is not new. Aristotle, for example, argued that *poiesis* (literary creation in general) builds a bridge between the individual and the universal. Differently than history, whose subject is what *happened*, *poiesis* tells us what happens, Aristotle wrote. *Poiesis*, therefore, "is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history, for *poiesis* tend to express the universal, history the particular."[46] If postmodernism has been able to transform philosophy, as Richard Rorty said, into "a literary genre,"[47] in the age of ecological crisis and culture, literature can be turned *once again* into a form of philosophical discourse: an educational and reflexive form, which is ethical in that it provides meaningful representations of the world and produces, by virtue of these representations, awareness about values. In an ecocritical framework, the representations of nature, of the non-human, of environmental conflicts have a value which is *per se* normative; namely, they contain ethical directions and can help us orient our behaviour toward responsibility for and inclusion of otherness. So conceived, ecocriticism makes literature a form of applied ethics: accordingly, just like other forms of applied ethics (bioethics, business ethics, environmental ethics, etc.) literature is not limited to the realm of metalanguage but speaks the language of the things it represents, revealing their normative side. This language is clearly a creative language, but in this very creativity lies, according to ecocriticism, the power of literature. This form of creativity is oriented to the production and representation of values. Production of values, I said; but I could instead say: *invention* of values. This shift of terms is not unimportant, since the Latin word *inventio* does not mean here a mere 'making-up' of something out of nothing but, rather, an *in-venire*, *finding* values that traditional culture has so far occluded. Literature, like any work of art, makes these 'inventions of values' universally sharable.

More than ever, the idea of literature and culture as a 'radical commitment' is at stake here. As Martha Nussbaum has written, a "society that wants to foster the just treatment of all of its members has strong reasons to foster an exercise of the compassionate imagination that crosses social boundaries, or tries to."[48] In this sense, a political use of literature and of "narrative imagina-

[46] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Ingram Bywater (Whitefish NY: Kessinger, 2004): 10.

[47] Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972–1980* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982): 90–109.

[48] Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 92.

tion"[49] can be the premise for a moral agency which is open to otherness, in whatever form.

Going back to the centre–periphery/global–local metaphor, we might say that ecocriticism tries to put emphasis on 'local' or 'peripheral narratives', meaning by 'local' and 'peripheral' those narratives and those subjects so far considered as 'Other' and ideologically marginalized. The commitment of an ecological humanism is to listen to 'peripheral narratives' and to include them in the 'order of telling'; to translate them from 'vernacular' into 'history', to acknowledge them as *histories*, but without conceptually isolating or juxtaposing them with each other. Including peripheral narrations in the 'order of telling' means, instead, creating among the narratives themselves a dialectical synthesis, in which the normativeness of value is located. It is this very connection (typical of ecocriticism) between the singularity of the narratives and the universality of their normative content that enables us to speak of local natures and global responsibilities.

Ecocriticism and the languages of otherness

Even though first used to enrich the scope of interpretations of Anglo-American nature writing, ecocriticism basically means *ecological* literary criticism.[50] This implies that such criticism looks at literature and other cultural forms as part of an intellectual ecosystem, implemented and sustained by the interactions between the natural world, both human and non-human, and its cultural representations. In my view, this justifies the point of view according to which the literary works and cultural objects analyzed by ecocriticism are not necessarily part of an 'ecological' or 'environmental' genre nor strictly connected with Anglo-American studies.[51] Literary works such as Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Jean Giono's *The Man Who*

[49] See Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 85–112.

[50] I am well aware that this is a debated point. Lawrence Buell, for example, himself a pivotal figure in ecocritical studies, prefers to use the term 'environmental criticism' (see, in particular, Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, 12). A discussion of this theoretical as well as terminological issue is, of course, not possible here. Nonetheless, in my opinion, the term 'environmental' does not stress the 'ecological' function of a literary criticism based on an idea of literature conceived of as a space in which ideas, cultural images, and moral values live, interact, and evolve – a dynamic described by Gregory Bateson's 'ecology of mind'.

[51] This has been pointed out by several ecocritics, and on many occasions. It is interesting the way the issue has been discussed in a *PMLA* "Forum," especially by Scott Slovic and Ursula Heise. See "Forum on Literature of the Environment," *PMLA* 114.5 (1999): 1096–1098; 1102–1103. See also Heise, "Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism."

Planted Trees; films such as *The Secret of the Old Woods* or *The Scavengers* by Ermanno Olmi, *The Wild Blue Yonder* or *Grizzly Man* by Werner Herzog; or even land-art installations such as *7000 Oaks* or *In Defence of Nature* by Joseph Beuys: in a word, every creation which explicitly or implicitly contains an ethical characterization of the relationship between humankind or society and nature is potentially suitable for ecocritical interpretation. For an ecocritical approach, works like these have the same potential interest as Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Thoreau's *Walden*, or DeLillo's *Underworld*.

Even though genres like environmental literature or nature writing are very popular in ecocritical studies, I am convinced that outstripping the borders of these genres – something which is becoming more and more frequent – reinforces ecocriticism. Awareness about our interrelatedness with the non-human world can be produced not only by explicitly ecological or environmental works but by virtually any work that offers a critical representation of the relationship between the human and her/his 'Other'.

Using a metaphor, one could say that ecocriticism rediscovers and restores the *languages* of this dialectical relationship. This is visible, for instance, in what we can call an *interspecies literature*, a literature in which the representation of non-human animals or of the natural world is not hierarchically oriented, or not exclusively presented in an anthropocentric perspective. There are innumerable examples of this in all literature. From Thoreau and Melville to Franz Kafka, William Faulkner, Jorge Luis Borges, Clarice Lispector, Italo Calvino, Anna Maria Ortese: nature and non-human animals are narrated in a way that does not imply a hierarchy but, rather, a complexity of interdependent languages. In the works of these authors, narrative images evoke otherness not in order to reinforce human centrality but to see humanity as well as a 'face' of this otherness.[52] Here, stirring up and listening to different intentional orders means creating a horizontal dialectic between human and non-human worlds.

Another crucial aspect of ecocriticism's 'linguistic horizontality' is the recalling of *place* into the narrative order: here local natures gain visibility and value. This operation goes two ways. On the one hand, it is place that 'narrates' about itself. We may think of bioregionalist literature, of place-related narratives, of Gary Snyder, Annie Dillard, of the French writer Jean Giono, of the Italian poets Eugenio Montale and Andrea Zanzotto, of Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, and, as mentioned earlier, of some significant examples

[52] I have myself analyzed as 'interspecies' literature the work of the Italian writer Anna Maria Ortese and of the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector. See Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria*, 75–100.

from contemporary land art (from Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer to Andy Goldsworthy, Nancy Holt, or Dennis Oppenheim). By the same token, ecocriticism urges the rescue of place-related linguistic and cultural expressions: dialects, endangered languages. I have studied this subject in the work of Pier Paolo Pasolini, one of the major figures in twentieth-century Italian culture.[53] Here the discourse of local languages and of what Pasolini called "singular realities" (we may call them 'local natures') is not only connected with the retrieval of a "language closer to the world"[54] but is also one with the discourse of endangered landscapes. The poet Conrad Aiken wrote:

> language and landscape are the same
> for we ourselves are language and are land.[55]

If this is true, then the rescue of a language implies a cultural rescue in the form of a partnership between nature and culture. In both cases, we are in the presence of 'local natures' whose narratives exhibit explicit values. Ecocriticism endeavours to build a bridge between the uniqueness of the narrated subjects and the universality of the moral instructions that these subjects carry in themselves. This happens when an ecocritical interpretation looks at the language of place in the sky dance performed by a male woodcock at dusk every day from April to June, as in *A Sand County Almanac*;[56] or when it finds the language of place in idioms which are part of the landscape and one with the land, as in Pasolini. Local natures – global responsibilities, we might say: and this is because these moral instructions are neither 'territorial' nor simply human-related: in its uniqueness, place is the bearer of a value in itself and of a value shared universally, with every other place. Ecocriticism shows, then, that 'abstract places' do not exist. Places live in concrete terms on the basis of their biocultural relations, of their 'storied residences'. As Jim Cheney wrote, "self and geography are bound together in a narrative which locates us in the moral space of defining relations."[57]

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[53] Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria*, 101–22; Serenella Iovino, "The Ashes of Italy: Pier Paolo Pasolini's Ethics of Place," in *Culture and the State: Landscape and Ecology*, vol. 1, ed. James Gifford & Gabrielle Zezulka–Mailloux (Edmonton, Alberta: CRC Humanities Studio): 70–91.

[54] Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Passione e ideologia* (1960; Turin: Einaudi, 1985): 116.

[55] "A Letter From Li-Po," in *Selected Poems*, with a new foreword by Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford UP, 2003): 254.

[56] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac & Sketches Here and There* (Oxford & New York: Oxford UP, 1949): 30.

[57] Cheney, "Post-modern Environmental Ethics as Bioregional Narrative," 126.

But among the languages evoked by ecocriticism, there is also the language of society, in what Lawrence Buell has called the "second wave" of "environmental criticism."[58] We have now reached the point where ecocriticism and the political scope of environmental ethics come closer together. I think here of the importance for ecocriticism of indigenous literatures (e.g., Leslie Marmon Silko, Simon Ortiz, Louise Erdrich), of African-American and postcolonial literatures (e.g., Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kincaid, Margaret Atwood), or of the so-called environmental-justice literature (Linda Hogan, Ana Castillo, Toni Cade Bambara) and of what has been named "the toxic discourse."[59]

The presence of this 'second wave' is important here to show how, emphasizing the social and ecological message of 'eccentric' experiences (so called because of their 'non-centrality': female, indigenous, homosexual, disabled writing, postcolonial literatures), literary and cultural criticism can contribute to dismantling ideological constructs which support the parallel hierarchization of nature and marginalized humans.

To talk about ecocriticism and an 'ecological' humanism means to imagine an evolved form of culture which is a culture of responsibility for both nature and society. Such a culture could make us better citizens, because it would enable us to listen to the language of otherness, fragility, weakness.

A non-anthropocentric or ecological humanism thus also implies a desire for social inclusion. The meaning of the word 'non-anthropocentric' related to a human context becomes clearer here, because we can see how the idea of 'human' (*anthropos*) which this centrality is based upon is not a neutral and inclusive category. This humanism seeks out and expresses a post-ideological world-view. Far from the impositions of dominating paradigms, such a world-view discloses a constructive and inventive form of ecology of mind, a project of natural history (namely, a narrative) which can be defined in human terms only in view of the fact that the human is itself a part of nature.

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[58] See Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, passim.

[59] See Joni Adamson, *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* (Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2001); Norbert Platz, "Rediscovering the Forgotten Space of Nature: A Plea for Ecocriticism," in *Borderlands: Negotiating Boundaries in Postcolonial Writing*, ed. Monika Reif–Hülser (Cross/Cultures 40, ASNEL Papers 4; Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1999): 175–88; Zapf, *Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie*, 155–80; *Restoring the Connection to the Natural World: Essays on the African American Environmental Imagination*, ed. Sylvia Mayer (Münster: LIT, 2003); Christine Gerhardt, "The Greening of African-American Landscapes: Where Ecocriticism Meets Post-Colonial Theory," *Mississippi Quarterly* 55.4 (Fall 2002): 515–33; Lawrence Buell, "Toxic Discourse," *Critical Inquiry* 24.3 (1998): 639–65.

A non-anthropocentric humanism

The culture which an ecological humanism aims at is a courageous culture: a culture of inclusivity – one that refuses to be another form of elitism. It is, in turn, a culture which tends to overcome the simplistic orientalisms of multiculturalism: a constructive culture of community. "Humanism is sustained by a sense of community," wrote Edward Said. In factm "what has really been lost is a sense of the density and interdependence of human life, which can neither be reduced to a formula nor be brushed aside as irrelevant." The community to which an ecological humanism refers is not only a community made by "other interpreters and other societies and periods" but, most of all, it is a community to be built.[60] And the horizontal, both social and ecological, interdependence of this community makes such humanism a form of hospitality, of openness.

This induces us also to critically re-think the relationship between the culture of this new humanism and traditional culture. The attitude of environmental culture toward tradition is dialectical, ambivalent. Like every culture, environmental culture expresses, in fact, a continuity with traditional humanism; nonetheless, it rejects the dualism of humanity and nature conveyed by this humanism. At the same time, environmental culture reappraises the sense of challenge (to limits, to preconceived truths, to loss of meaning) that traditional humanism represented. That is why we can say that tradition has to be thought of as a *route*, rather than as a *root*.[61] In that it faces a changing world, tradition as a cultural, social, political identity is a continuous invention; as a form of knowledge, it undergoes an evolutionary process. For this reason, what is crucial is not being faithful to our fathers but, rather, being faithful to our children. Environmental culture is the attempt to express this faithfulness, and to see culture itself as a self-corrective ethical *route*.

Humanism is not a culture based on necessity. It presupposes, indeed, that "every doctrine based on necessity […] communicates a feeling of distrust in the real power humans have to improve their life."[62] This means that human evolution and adaptation are driven neither by chance nor by necessity, but that they can be a pathway of freedom and of self-awareness, being the means of a culture that, evolving, can invent itself and its objects. Inventing a new kind of humanism, a non-anthropocentric one, is, then, to give voice to nature's claims as 'peripheral' claims, following, at the same time, in the footsteps of a

[60] All quotations are taken from Said, *Orientalism*, xxiii–xxvii.

[61] James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1997).

[62] Valsania, *Umanesimo postindustriale*, 133.

humanist tradition which is *per se* an ethic of culture – an ethic of culture which is in itself an ethic of the future.

Talking about a non-anthropocentric humanism may remind us of Aldo Leopold, who called land ethic an "evolution" of ethics. As an evolved ethic does not reject previous ethics but supplements them, enlarging "the boundaries of the community to include soils, water, plants, and animals or collectively: the land,"[63] this humanism may be considered as a form of 'evolved humanism' as well; a humanism no longer based on the assumption that concepts such as 'dignity' and 'value' are exclusively to be related to the human species. Nature's dignity and worth, as well as the dignity and the worth of every form of 'otherness', can instead be functional to human dignity and worth, because they suggest the ability humans have to shape their identity, making it permeable to diversity and ecologically able to evolve with it. This also explains why many environmental thinkers conceive of environmental culture in terms of a renewed pragmatism: namely, of an inventive and participatory ethical attitude, which relates itself to different situations not in order to find alleged metaphysical truths but to affirm contextual values of utility, solidarity, and social responsibility.[64]

Pragmatism replaces faith in a hypothetical absolute with faith in the human ability to self-determine: namely, the ability humans have to produce, through the critical potential of their cultural experience, their own values. Thinkers like John Dewey and William James introduced a philosophy that questions the existence of a pre-determined destiny, of an *a priori* necessity – a philosophy which believes, in turn, in a form of democratic and *public* freedom. In this sense, thought is an essential means of political construction and evolution: it brings, in fact, a transformative ambition into society, uncovering the ideological representations and the rhetorical tricks of the "powers now in power."[65] This means recalling every "false necessity" back to our ability to

[63] Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 204.

[64] See *Environmental Pragmatism*, ed. Andrew Light & Eric Katz (London: Routledge, 1996); Ben A. Minteer & Robert E. Manning, "Pragmatism in Environmental Ethics: Democracy, Pluralism and the Management of Nature," *Environmental Ethics* 21 (1999): 191–207; Neil W. Browne, *The World in Which We Occur: John Dewey, Pragmatist Ecology, and American Ecological Writing in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2007).

[65] See Paulo Freire & Ira Shor, *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* (Westport CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1987): 56.

transform it or, rather, to "make it human."[66] Such a humanist culture is clearly the opposite of a 'culture', which produces ecomafia and social conflicts.

Conclusion

Italy certainly does not lead the way in environmental culture. Yet, to mention my country one more time, in Italy forms of literary reaction to the ecomafia are rising and becoming popular. It is novels, in some cases even collected in editorial series, such as *Verdenero-Racconti di ecomafia*, by the publisher Edizioni Ambiente (as far as I know a unique case; moreover, this series is certified as ecologically sustainable). These short novels take their inspiration directly from the reports on the ecomafia, and their purpose is to make narrative a means of social awareness, a moral stance about the eco-social crisis. But the fact that literature can be a form of resistance, both social and ecological, is not new if we think of the importance of writers, poets, and public intellectuals for environmental protection in Italy. I think here, for example, of the novelist Giorgio Bassani, who in 1955 founded the organization 'Italia Nostra' as the major cultural and environmental institution in defence of the Italian landscape; of Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose writings denounced the destruction of Italian territorial beauty and, by the same token, of a biodiversity at the same time natural, cultural, and linguistic. Nor can one forget Pasolini's public appeals to UNESCO to save endangered African landscapes and historic sites. I think of Anna Maria Ortese, who, especially in the last years of her life, joined Greenpeace's ecological battles. The struggle for the rights of what she called forms of "weakness" (such as animals, subjected women, or nature itself) is the core of her more significant novels and of her last writings. I think, too, of Italo Calvino, whose short tales on the 'alienation' of nature in the urban landscape, on industrial pollution and massive building developments, are early examples of an eco-literary form of reaction to environmental degradation. This tells us how crucial the role of literature and culture can be for the moral conscience of a society. The American thinker Alexander Meiklejohn wrote, in his essay *The First Amendment is an Absolute*: "The

[66] I refer here to Roberto M. Unger, *False Necessity: Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy* (London: Verso, 2001), and Cornel West & Roberto M. Unger, *The Future of American Progressivism: An Initiative for Political and Economic Reform* (Boston MA: Beacon, 1998).

people do need novels and dramas and paintings and poems 'because they will be called upon to vote'."[67]

But as long as these claims remain an elitist and rhetorical discourse, there will not be much hope of a new humanism spreading. In the age of ecological crisis, in fact, such humanism is either progressive and inclusive or it is nothing. And in the age of the ecomafia, either humanism is useful for creating an actual emancipatory discourse, or it remains an empty word. I believe that the task of ecocriticism, thanks to its theoretical openness and cross-disciplinarity, may really be decisive. Environmental ethics have refined theoretical tools, a vocabulary, new conceptual paradigms. Ecocriticism and literature can use these paradigms to implement environmental culture and to send a message of resilience, conciliation, and awareness about the rights of what is 'local' or 'peripheral'. May this message give our overall perspective a sense of ethical commitment, and become on the global political level a premise for a truly democratic life.

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[67] See Alexander Meiklejohn, "The First Amendment is an Absolute," *Supreme Court Review* (1961): 245–66.

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